

Childhood Nutrition Legislation Would Maintain the School District of Philadelphia's unique method for providing free meals, while opening it up to other school districts around the country

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WASHINGTON, DC – Congressman Joe Sestak (PA-07), as a Member of the Education and Labor Committee, voted for the Improving Nutrition for America's Children Act, which will reauthorize and improve successful childhood nutrition programs. These programs include Women Infant and Children (WIC) and the National School Meal Program. The bill passed out of Committee by a bipartisan vote of 32-13.

Congressman Sestak worked successfully with other members of the Pennsylvania delegation, including Congressmen Chaka Fattah (PA-02) and Bob Brady (PA-01), to include a measure within the bill that makes permanent Philadelphia's effective universal school lunch program and allows other school districts to follow Philadelphia's lead. Congressman Sestak had previously introduced legislation, H.R. 2690, the School Meal Enhancement Act, which would achieve these same goals. (See below for further details.)

"Today's action by the committee moves us one step closer to saving a program that has successfully brought nutritious meals to children in Philadelphia who would not otherwise get

them, and enables school districts around the country to follow the example set by Philadelphia,” said Congressman Sestak. “I look forward to continuing to work with my colleagues to see that this legislation passes the House and the Senate and makes its way to the President to be signed into law.”

The School District of Philadelphia (SDOP) program has faced elimination by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) despite its proven effectiveness in ensuring that students in need receive free meals. Last year, Congressman Sestak joined other members of the Pennsylvania delegation, Governor Rendell, and Mayor Nutter to have U.S. Agriculture Secretary Vilsack agree not to take action on the Philadelphia program until Congress had an opportunity to conclude the reauthorization.

The bill approved by committee today also incorporates language from Congressman Sestak's School Meal Safety and Standards Act, H.R. 4590, which takes an important step to increase food safety by calling on the Secretary of the USDA to improve communications of recall information to school food authorities, reducing risk to students. A Government Accountability Office report on Food and Nutrition Services (FNS) uncovered that food items that USDA says are contaminated are not being pulled from school cafeterias. Additionally, *USA Today* found that private industry standards far exceed government standards in recognizing threats to consumer health and safety.

The larger bill, the “Improving Nutrition for America's Children Act,” reauthorizes childhood nutrition programs and makes key advancements toward ending childhood hunger by improving the quality of meals children eat both in and out of school and in child care settings, supporting community efforts to reduce childhood hunger and, for the first time, establishing nutrition standards for all foods sold in schools. Specifically, the bill: authorizes increased reimbursement to schools to meet higher nutritional standards for meals; authorizes new direct certifications methods, including using Medicaid and CHIP data to increase enrollment; and creates a grant program to encourage stronger connections between local farms and schools through farm-to-school programs. The National School Lunch Program alone provided more than \$259 million for free and reduced price lunches in Pennsylvania, feeding more than 1.14 million

students every year.

Details of School Lunch Legislation

Congressman Sestak has been a staunch supporter of continuing and expanding Philadelphia's program after, in 2008, the USDA announced that it planned on ending the successful application-less Universal Feeding pilot program at the SDOP following the 2009-10 school year. Under the methods used in Philadelphia, a socio-demographic survey establishes the approximate eligibility rates at select schools where a large percentage of the students would be eligible. The SDOP then offers every student at those schools free meals and the USDA reimburses the SDOP at the rate determined by the survey. The SDOP covers the cost for the remaining meals and is able to provide free lunches to all students in more than 100 of the District's schools.

The bill approved by the committee today would begin expanding the socioeconomic survey option by allowing three new districts to join for a three year trial. After three years in the program, it would be determined if the program was successful enough in those districts to be continued permanently and other districts would take their place in the trial.

“At a time when more than 16 percent of our children are obese and almost 78,000 children in

Philadelphia alone live in households that do not provide them with access to enough food for an active and healthy lifestyle, we must build upon the success of Philadelphia's program," said Congressman Sestak. "As the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PADED) has rightly pointed out, 'elimination of the Universal Feeding program in the School District of Philadelphia will not benefit USDA, the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, or the city of Philadelphia, but most of all, it will not benefit the children who depend upon the school district as the source, and sometimes their only source, of one of the basic necessities of life, which is food.'"

The program removes a paper application process that USDA has long acknowledged has significant problems. For example, not all students return forms -- especially those from economically challenged families -- and others students that are eligible do not participate because of the stigma attached to receiving a free lunch. The net cost in Philadelphia has been negligible as expenses for the survey and non-reimbursed meals have been offset by the savings from ending the paper application process.

Additionally, the SDOP is able reduce the cost of lunch per student by building upon economies of scale by expanding the number of students eating school meals. Any increase in cost to the USDA was due to the system being more effective at covering more eligible students, which should be a demonstration of success for the program.

This method can also be more effective than the other alternative by which school districts receive free meals based on the number of families on food stamps because in some areas, for a variety of reasons, the participation rate in the food stamp program are particularly low.

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Born and raised in Delaware County, former 3-star Admiral Joe Sestak served in the Navy for 31 years and now serves as the Representative from the 7th District of Pennsylvania. He led a series of operational commands at sea, including Commander of an aircraft carrier battle group of 30 U.S. and allied ships with over 15,000 sailors and 100 aircraft that conducted operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. After 9/11, Joe was the first Director of "Deep Blue," the Navy's anti-terrorism unit that established strategic and operations policies for the "Global War on Terrorism." He served as President Clinton's Director for Defense Policy at the National Security Council in the White House, and holds a Ph.D. in Political Economy and Government from Harvard University.□ According to the office of the House Historian, Joe is the highest-ranking former military officer ever elected to the U.S. Congress.